

Female Idols in East Asia from the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract. In recent years, people have gradually begun to pay attention to the development of idol industry. Idols, as the objects chased after by teenagers, need to shoulder the responsibility of public figures and play a guiding role for fans. Based on the prosperous female idol industry in East Asia, this thesis expounds the images of female idols in China, Japan and South Korea, and analyzes their historical background, the degree of the rise of female consciousness and their limitations. It is believed that with continuous development and improvement of the industry as well as the growing female movement in the world, the leading role of female idols for ordinary women will be more and more obvious.

Keywords: feminism, East Asian female idols, female consciousness.

1. Feminism and Female Idols

1.1 Girl Groups Manufacturing in Three East Asian Countries

Girl group generally refers to a group of multiple-person females selected, trained and organized by a brokerage enterprise in the entertainment industry. Brokerage companies will give team members a position in the team according to their own characteristics or specialties, and this position will largely determine their “character setting” after the debut, that is, the image displayed in front of fans. Therefore, the girl groups of various styles or members of different positioning in the same group are often with different target fan bases. The classic positioning allocation method is based on the combination of Japan and South Korea version. In Korean entertainment circles, the members of a girl group are divided into three categories: “main singer”, “main dancer” and “rapper”, who play their own roles in different parts of the song. The “main singer” is mainly responsible for high-pitched part, while the “main dancer” usually takes the responsibility of “center” in the refrain or “bridge” part of the song, and the “rapper” is responsible for the rap part. Brokerage companies sometimes choose “beauty representative” based on appearance, “leader” based on age. They may also make their option based on female idols’ performance besides the singer field, such as “variety representative”. In addition, as companies and fans sometimes disagree about the positioning, there are also “official” or “civil” terms. Japanese entertainment industry has a relatively simple way of positioning and distribution, which is mainly based on “top” and “ace”. The former refers to the person who is more popular in the team. Since there is often more than one popular member, the expression of “top line” is derived later. An “ace” refers to someone who do well in everything. These methods of positioning, naming and distribution have been widely used in Chinese entertainment circles in recent years.

Although China, Japan and South Korea are all located in east Asia, the development of girl group culture is widely divergent. Since entertainment industry in Japan and South Korea started earlier, their female idol industries are relatively mature, and the characteristics of “domestic sale” to “export” are obvious. For example, Japanese girl group “AKB48” of Heisei era and South Korean girl group “Girls’ Generation” are widely known in Asia. According to data in official website of group, “AKB48 Group” currently consists of five overseas sub-groups, including Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan and other countries and regions, all of which have achieved considerable sales volume and audio source streaming media index. “Girls’ Generation” is the first South Korean girl group that has more than 100 million MV hits on Youtube. Their success has broken the long-term situation of South Korean entertainment industry dominated by boy groups and revitalized the girl group market. Chinese girl group industry started late and its development mode is mainly based on reference and imitation. For example, “SNH48” and “Rocket

Girls 101” are relatively famous girl groups in mainland China. The former was once the overseas sister group of “AKB48”. After its separation, the operation mode of “AKB48” is still used. The latter is a group formed by voting for members, which is modeled on Korean variety show “Produce 101”. Both of them have been successful in the Chinese market for different fan groups.

In terms of the female idols image requirements, China, Japan and South Korea have their own characteristics. Japan pays more attention to the affinity, infectivity and the uniqueness of its own character setting. Most Japanese female idols have not undergone orthodox singing and dancing training before debuting. The smaller age debut can bring a sense of achievement of nurtured system to the “otaku groups”. Besides, there are more activities like “handshake meeting”, “theatrical performance” and “photo album” to reduce the distance between idols and fans. South Korea pays more attention to the cultivation of actual strength and the integrity of the group. The Korean brokerage company has been mature in training. The content includes singing, dancing, sense of variety, acting, expression management, etiquette, etc. All the idols that want to debut need to go through the practice period, lasting from 1 year to 7 years. The requirement for idol’s anti-pressure ability is relatively high, and the emphasis is on the cultivation of “group spirit”, that is, the development of personal characteristics is suppressed, and the focus is mainly on team activities. It is worth mentioning that Korean girl group’s target fan base has been turning to females in recent years. The image of China’s female idols is different from that of other countries, showing diversified features. The public often cannot come up with a common standard to make demands on the image of female idols.

However, no matter how early or late it started and the degree of development, China, Japan and South Korea all have national girl groups that are known or loved by general public. The image of national girl groups can often represent the overall aesthetic orientation of a country’s people towards women and become the standard for judging the image of popular women. This is because the girl group is an entertainment product based on the female culture of three countries. It has the representativeness of female images, and it also invisibly influences and shapes the images of the new generation of women, which has the function of standard and enlightenment for women.

1.2 Presentation of Female Image

The presentation of female image in public media has always been one of the important fields of feminist research. In novels, movies, TV dramas and other mass culture works, the image and psychological activities reflected by female characters are of great significance to judge the public’s awakening degree of feminism and the changes of social mainstream ideology.

Due to the geographical proximity and the influence of historical and cultural communication, China, Japan and South Korea have all shared the same characteristics in the transformation of social female images. The traditional thought of “men are superior to women” was deeply rooted in ancient times. After entering the modern era, the traditional culture of these three countries has been unprecedentedly affected by wars, reform demands and western culture. The new western ideas of equality between men and women and freedom of women have been gradually accepted by the enlightened art creators, and the presentation of female images in novels, films and TV dramas began to change in times.

In China’s film and television works, the “white pond lily” heroine has been openly hated and attacked by many women. With the rise of women’s consciousness of right, the original kind, harmless, pure and innocent interpretation of “white pond lily” has been replaced, and it has become an image of giving everything for love, compromising, and bringing disaster to others because of her hypocrisy. The rise of the anti- “white pond lily” fully reflects women’s struggle against the traditional patriarchal society. With this kind of “resistance” gradually discovered by art creators, “big heroine” TV drama, which focuses on women’s scheming and intelligent battle, has entered people’s field of view and achieved success. For instance, in the legend of Zhen Huan, a national drama released in 2011, the heroine “Zhen Huan” was naive at the early stage, but in order to survive and revenge in the palace at the later stage, she killed her innocent thoughts and

abandoned love. This change of life image resonates with contemporary women, and is also a portrayal of women's struggling career path [1].

The anti-traditional setting of "strong female and weak male" is not uncommon in South Korean films and TV dramas in recent years, such as *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon* and *Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bok Joo*, which all mainly depict life from the perspective of women. The heroines are full of completely different qualities from the traditional female's passivity and dependence. In the relationship with male protagonists, they are in the position of driver. Such setting drama has gained a lot of attention in Asia. Currently, even the scriptwriters who take "Cinderella" as the main plot, still add the elements of "female superiority and male inferiority" in the supporting roles, such as *The Heirs* and *Inner Beauty*. They both reflect the mentality and demand of contemporary Korean women to break through the cage of patriarchy and to liberate themselves.

"Full-time housewife" is a typical case of Japanese female stereotypes, and is also the central topic of discussion on female images in Japanese films and TV dramas. For instance, in the Japanese drama *We Married as a Job*, which has been widely discussed in China in recent years, the heroine Moriyama Mikuri goes to the protagonist's home to serve as a domestic worker, and then falls in love with him. However, when the protagonist faces with a career crisis, he hopes to save the financial expenditure of household labor by marrying the heroine, making her very dissatisfied. Wives who are considered to be economically dependent have to do housework and take care of the elderly and children every day, but these tasks cannot be measured by economic income, leading to the stereotype of "parasite" in the minds of men [2]. The image of "rebellious wife" is a voice for Japanese women who are objectified as labor machines and birth machines, striving to get rid of their family attachment status.

Although the three countries of East Asia originated from similar ideological schools on the issue of women's historical status. However, in modern times, due to the different degrees of women's awakening and different ways and means of the government's reform of gender issues in modern times, there are differences in the images and issues of women that are mainly discussed in films and television dramas. But the only constant is that the traditional image of women is being broken through, and the challenge to men's rules will never stop.

2. Girl Group Culture Rooted in the Cultural Soil

2.1 Sailor Suit and Soft Pornography

In the selection of Japanese girl groups, brokerage companies generally choose the affinity and personality charm as the selection criteria, rather than their singing or dancing ability. Japanese female idol industry mainly relies on male "otaku" groups as main consumers. As a result, "otaku charming" attribute is one of the important reasons for the high affinity requirement, and female idols are usually required to close the distance with fans. They cherish their fans and are eager to receive praise and recognition from their fans' feedback. They make direct contact with their fans by replying to private messages on social media platforms, sending daily fan welfare emails, holding handshake meetings, and issuing sailor suit photo albums. Japanese female idols, through frequent physical contact and shooting nudity or "sailor suit" photos, are often labeled as "soft pornography", and are at the bottom of the East Asian idol contempt chain.

This kind of "soft pornography" female idol image is closely related to Japan's historical factors and cultural background. As a defeated country of World War II, Japan faced huge indemnity and the shadow of death brought by "Atomic Bomb" after the war, which sharply reduced the male labor force in Japanese society and made them unable to actively engage in production activities due to psychological trauma after the war. At this time, women played the role of soothing men's minds and bodies, and they shouldered the burden of the family and participated into social activities. They are both pure victims and great saviors. Meanwhile, men hankered for comfort and warmth from them.

Many people are convinced that war is completely male-dominated from beginning to end, initiated and participated by men. But it turns out that women also bear the burden of war, because

the difference between women, men and children is one of the important reasons for war. In addition, war is also one of the opportunities for the construction of social gender. Men show the image of “guardian” in the war, while in most cases women appear as “the guarded”. When men are engaged in the war, the significant increase of women’s participation in social production activities contributes to the gender transformation of women [3]. Both the female images displayed during the war and after the war are generated in response to the war and the needs of male as the subject. Women do not reject and resist the image during war time, because they are eager to play an important role in maintaining the war system, showing the power of women and gaining recognition at the social and national level. This two-way need and desire to be needed can explain the relationship between Japanese female idols and their male fans, which is not an accidental product but a product of the historical construction of a specific period from post-war to the rapid growth period.

In the environment of defeat, women’s comfort to men is mainly reflected in the warm maternal image. In the literature works of this period, women also appeared mainly as tolerant, strong and kind images. Authors paid attention to the shaping of gentle characters, which happened to coincide with the main image of Japanese female idols. Behind the tenderness and beauty lies the glory of motherhood, but in what way do men obtain spiritual solace? One of the important ways of showing maternal tenderness is to express it through “sex”. By purchasing female “sex” services, men are attached to women and seek a sense of security in the embrace of motherhood, thus extending their spiritual life. This can also explain the rise of “flesh literature” in Japan after World War II (4).

In the journal *Japanese History Studies* published by the Japan History Research Association, a special issue entitled “Viewing Women from the perspective of body” was set up to discuss how sex and body are constructed and regulated in a specific social and cultural environment. The influence of the gendered body is not limited to a specific period of time, but also has a huge impact on the performance and shaping of female images of future generations [3].

Nowadays, “handshake meeting” and “photo album” are one of the important sources of income for Japanese female idols. In the “handshake meeting”, the message is directly received through physical contact with “oshi” and verbal communication during the handshake process. This unique way of communication also makes the fan orientation and “joining the fan base” approach between Japan, China and South Korea entirely different. Japan’s unique “contact” culture also confirms this. Male passers-by may become fans only because of the fact that a female idol has soft hands or fragrant body, which is the reason why it is labeled as “soft pornography”. Similarly, after buying a photo album of female idol (a way of “sex” service) to meet the visual and spiritual needs, male passers-by may “join the fan base” due to a certain physical feature of a female idol that suits their taste. This industrial culture, which takes female body as the selling point, has formed a solid pattern. No matter it is the national girl group “AKB48” in the Heisei era, or the rising “Nogizaka 46” and “Keyakizaka 46” in the current Reiwa era, it cannot be divorced from the industrial mode and commercial law of “Yasushi Akimoto system”.

Japan, as the main belligerent and defeated country in the World War II, has a prominent stigma of “war” in east Asian countries. The image of women formed during the war had a profound impact on the rise and shaping of Japanese female idol industry in the 1990s, and further influenced the cognition and standard of female image in other countries and among Japanese people. Up to now, Japanese female idol industry still takes body contact or nudity as the main selling point, affinity of service to male fans as the selection standard, and “otaku charming” as the main feature to keep a foothold in the east Asian idol industry. The awakening of feminist consciousness in Japanese female idol and industry is still far from enough.

2.2 Girl Power and Gender Struggle

Hallyu culture is quite representative in the east Asian cultural circle. It leads the aesthetic and fashion trends in east Asia, which is the object of young people’s pursuit of fashion. One of the most important reasons for the popularity of Korean pop culture in East Asia is the excellent decorating strength of Korean entertainment industry, mature and mechanized operation system and

the ability to change according to social trends. These characteristics enable it to continuously input new products in entertainment and culture export with a rapid update rate. Therefore, South Korea's achievements in entertainment and cultural communication are much better than those of China and Japan. The Korean ministry of culture and sports has formulated a white paper on the 2017 Hallyu for entertainment industry, which divides and defines the time and development levels of each stage, as well as the representative artists of different periods. South Korean artists are also invited to travel with government officials to other countries for cultural diplomacy. The Korean government's emphasis on the Korean entertainment industry clearly demonstrates its important role in supporting economic growth, guiding public opinion, and spreading popular culture.

In the initial stage of Korean entertainment industry development, namely from the 1990s to the 2000s, boy group has always occupied a dominant position. In the public's mind, it is generally believed that boy group is responsible for sales volume, while girl group is responsible for audio source volume; however, the sales revenue for the brokerage company is much higher than the music streaming media. With the acceleration of data circulation in the 2010s and the development of network streaming media, this entertainment market of "strong male and weak female" has been largely alleviated. But it was not until the "second generation" girl group "Girl's Generation" reached the top, with the sales strength and favorable public image that advanced side by side with top line boy groups, people really realized the cultural brand value that girl groups brought to the country. Therefore, "Girls' Generation" was called the "national business card" of South Korea by the Korean people, and became the leader of girl groups in the future. One of the important points of "Girls' Generation" 's success is that its brokerage company attaches great importance to image transformation, hoping that it may appear in public with more diversified images to attract different fan groups. This emphasis on transformation and reluctance to be defined by stereotypes continued to the later debuted girl groups.

The "image transformation" between groups is not a random change but has the overall commonality. According to the changes of times and the progress of social female consciousness, the image of female idols is established. The 2000s was the foundation era for Hallyu to go to the world, and also the first time for Korean entertainment giants to explore overseas markets. According to the white paper issued by the Korean ministry of culture and sports, this stage belongs to the "second generation period". The female idols debuted during this period chose sexy and skin-baring as main image, with men as the main market. However, with the increasing number of debut years and growing feminist movement in South Korea, many entertainment companies began to pay attention to the female fan market of girl groups, and later came the saying that "Wining female fans means wining the world". Female idols began to make positive changes in image. In clothing, they wear a suit and tie like male idols. In terms of dance movements, the reduction of "breaking" and "sexual connotation" movements reflect the awakening of feminist consciousness in South Korea's entertainment industry.

According to the division of "Korean fan" in China, girl groups that debuted after 2018 are called the "five generations". For instance, "IZONE", "(G) I-DLE" and "ITZY", who have entered the first line with their debut songs, did not follow the convention of attracting male fans with sexy images to gain a foothold, and then made the transition as the situation changed. Instead, they expanded the target fan groups in their debut period with "fairy style" or "girl crush" style. In fact, their image strategy has been recognized by the market and achieved success. Meanwhile, the number of girl groups known as "fresh-selling groups" is decreasing day by day.

Simmor De Beauvoir argued that "women are shaped by society to be women. In order to achieve equality and liberation, women must reject femininity, which is restricted by social oppression, and cultivate masculinity." As is said by her, the definition and difference between men and women is not determined by reproductive organs, but by stereotypical gender images constructed by society and culture [5]. The idol market, which favors the "girl crush" style, and the female idols that emphasize the masculine temperament of women, have the role of image leading and flaunting for ordinary women. It can also reflect the rise of women' status in modern society and the enhancement of active consciousness.

In addition to the shift in stage image, many female idols have also begun to openly support feminist movements in South Korea. After Ewha Womans University held up slogans such as “here comes your sister” and “I am not your future wife, I am your future boss”, refusing to become a patriarchal vassal, female idols began to dare to talk about feminism in public or on multimedia platforms. For example, Son Na Eun, a member of “Apink”, posted a mobile phone shell printed with “Girls can do everything” on her IG account. Irene, a member of “Red Velvet”, declared that she had recently read Kim Ji Yeong born in 1982 at the group variety fan meeting. Bae Suzy, a former member of “Miss A”, spoke up for female anchor who suffered from illegal nude shooting. Although these behaviors have caused them to be attacked by some Korean men, they have also won the favor of feminists. Whether it is a character setting from the brokerage company, or a personal will, it deserves praising as a public female idol speaks up for female groups.

The expectations of men and women for female idol images are not the same. The Korean female idol industry can dig out men’s understanding inertia and women experience of expectation horizon, and the realization of rebellion against the male world is a major breakthrough in the process of female consciousness awakening.

2.3 Gender Equality in Imitation Learning

In the 2000s, when the market of Chinese female idol industry was at the initial stage, the public attention of female idols focused on Taiwan’s entertainment industry, such as “S.H.E”, which is still widely known until now. Ten years later, thanks to the imitation of Japanese and Korean idol industry mode and the implementation of the “ban on Hallyu”, China’s idol industry has been developing rapidly, and the market has been expanding swiftly, especially in terms of female idols. In 2018, for the fan group of female idols, the two grandest “celebrations” were the general election of the girl group “SNH48” and the final of “Produce 101”. In these two entertainment feasts, fan bases of female idols showed their spending power and high social attention, which were equal to those of male idol’s fans. However, it is not difficult to find out that “SNH48” was originally a sister group of Japan’s “AKB48”. Later, although it was removed from the Japanese operating company, it still retained the “48 Series” business mode. “Produce 101” was a program whose copyright was directly purchased by Tencent from “Produce101 (Korean version)”, a South Korean entertainment talent show, which was integrated with the competition system of Chinese talent shows in the past. Although they all adopt the industrial mode of other countries, they are essentially facing the mass market in China. Therefore, the female images of the selected female idols still have subculture characteristics of Chinese culture.

The more than 100 million votes in the final of “Produce 101” and the amount of money raised by several fan groups totaling more than 10 million triggered a national investigation into the status quo of “fan funding” and E-commerce platforms, which attracted widespread public attention, showing the “national degree” of the show. When studying the top 11 members selected by the audience to form the members of “Rocket Girls 101”, the female images they represent are not the same as those of Japan and South Korea, with similar or standardized model standards, but with diversity and uniqueness. Take Wu Xuanyi and Meng Meiqi as examples. They belong to Yue Hua entertainment enterprise, which adopts the Korean training mode. The company has cooperated with many Korean entertainment companies, and they had debut experiences in Korean group. Therefore, they pay attention to the construction of strength image and expression management. Yang Chaoyue, who won the third place, has no performance strength. When she is in front of the camera, her eyes glaze over in that she has not received orthodox idol training. However, the character setting of “koi fish (lucky dog) and “village girl” still let her stand out in the final, occupying a place among China idols. Duan Aojuan, who won the fourth place, debuted with “a voice kissed by an angel”. She had no dance training before participating in the competition. Yamy, who won the fifth place, is good at rap and has the organizing ability, hence playing the role of leader. But she is less attractive in appearance than top four members. Yang Yunqing comes from Thailand, and she won the eighth place. She appeals to a certain female fan base with her short blond hair and tomboy image as soon as she appeared on stage. The discussion scope of such

diverse critical standards of female images presented by the public for female idols should not only focus on the public's pursuit of diversified entertainment products, but also explore why the public does not possess a holistic standard of female images from the perspective of history and culture.

Such lack of identification of "female identity" can be traced back to the female liberation movement in the late Qing dynasty in China. In modern times, when people with lofty ideals carried out national salvation, they never separated female liberation from the policies of democratic power, such as "promoting women's education" and "emancipating bound feet". The improvement of gender issues was never independent from other movements. During the agricultural mass production boom of the 1950s, Chairman Mao put forward the slogan "women can hold up half the sky" in order to arouse women's enthusiasm for production and increase the yield of crops. The limitation or advancement behind this slogan became the controversy between the later western feminists and Chinese women in terms of gender equality and female liberation movement. On this issue, Chinese women do not want to deny the subjectivity and motility of women behind the slogan, and do not want to give up their recognition of Chinese women's complete liberation heritage. However, at the same time, they do not understand what kind of female image Chinese women should display on the world stage.

Undeniably, the slogan "women can hold up half the sky" faced up to the important position of women in the process of labor production. It encouraged women to come out of the traditional family field. They were treated as equal labor force with men, and they could create equal labor value with men. Although its social significance is abundant, the slogan with women as the core of the liberation movement was only a publicity, and the "femininity" on the cultural level has been ignored. The male-standard labor requirement has proven that the subjectivity and center of gender equality policy are still men. It can be concluded that Chinese women are short of "gender awareness" and lack the positioning of their gender image, which in turn leads to the lack of public recognition of "female identity" [6]. This confusion of "femininity" is reflected in the female idols selected by national vote.

As a theory that attributes the causes of gender differences to social and cultural products, researchers tend to ignore the physiological differences between men and women when interpreting social gender. However, in the study of female image and feminism, this difference cannot afford to be ignored. It is precisely because policy makers have ignored this inherent and indelible difference in the process of promoting reform and change that Chinese women are totally ignorant of their own "social gender".

Chinese female idols are still in a stage of exploring the general cognition of their own industrial image. No one knows that what kind of styles and features Chinese women should possess, and men and women can only make subjective judgment on the female idol image from the perspective of their own "individuality".

3. Falling into and Getting Rid of "Patriarchy Trap"

3.1 Materialized and Objectified Female Idols

Female idols, who have long been attached to the patriarchal society and male fans, are still regarded as freely selectable entertainment products, and there are specially-assigned people who put exclusive entertainment labels on them. The root cause of this phenomenon lies in the entertainment ecology dominated by men. Entertainment enterprises pay attention to the consumption power of male groups, while female idols are considered as dependency and tools without self-worth.

Driven by the interests of idol industry, female idols are materialized into objects that can be measured by money. For example, in Japanese handshakes meeting and photo albums, the appearance and body of female idols are regarded as valuable commodities, and male fans can freely choose the type of woman they like and spend money on intimate contact with her. Japanese female idols have been labeled as "fan charming", "porn", "otaku's goodness" and other stereotypes

in China, which is also the result of the development of objectifying women under the trade of money and sex.

While female idols exist in the “consumable” position, the real entertainment leaders are still men. Ultimately, many people still believe that a female idols’ success should be judged from the perspective of men. For instance, the slogans “I want to be in love with a celebrity” and “I want to marry an IT president” on the recruitment poster of female idols, base the success and dream of women on the evaluation and opinions from men, with obvious trace of contempt for women. The recruited women may also not understand what they need to show in front of the public, but continue to carefully observe and cater to the needs of men, losing their independence. Even in a society that values spiritual products, women mostly still exist as objects.

3.2 Female Idols’ Subject Consciousness

To promote the awakening of female subject consciousness and jump out of male aesthetic framework, it is essential to establish correct cognition of social gender and natural gender. In the field of natural gender, the essence of recognizing gender differences lies in physiological differences, and this should not be ignored when we study related issues. Social gender is defined as the product of social culture. The values inherited from the patriarchal society for a long time are bound to carry about natural prejudice and discrimination against women. When examining and judging these values, women should maintain their independence and independent personality rather than fall into the parrot “patriarchy trap” [7].

In this regard, female idols are supposed to take social responsibilities, play the role of model function as public figures, take the lead in breaking through the stereotype of “a girl will doll herself up for him who loves her”, and change the unequal status quo of “being chosen” and “being endowed with value”. As members of the girl groups with certain influence, if they could pay attention to the issue of gender equality, establish the feminist identity and understand the social hardship suffered by women, they would play a leading and encouraging role for contemporary women. In this process, making a statement, as a public figure, will inevitably be defamed and defiled by people who have ulterior motives, but feminists should never be a derogatory term. Instead, she should be an active promoter of gender liberation. From female idols, the public should not see the image of “subordinate value”, but should catch sight of what the “new” women ought to look like in the future.

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